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SUBJECT: THE "TROPICAL UNITY" OF THE OPPOSITION

REF: A. CARACAS 437

1B. CARACAS 503

Classified By: Mark Wells, Acting Political Counselor, for
Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) The opposition remains convinced that the referendum is on track, according to a top aide for Enrique Mendoza. Organizers of the February 14 march to defend the signatures calling for a recall vote on President Hugo Chavez are planning on 100,000 (some hope for one million) to participate with some sporadic violence possible. The march is an attempt to keep pressure on CNE after a month of relative calm among the opposition that saw little progress on the count. The Democratic Coordinating Committee (DCC) receives its CNE information from a variety of sources and then takes consensus decisions that are often not the most effective. Traditional parties form one bloc of opinion within the opposition, while three parties -- Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela, and Causa R -- flip-flop. The DCC's executive group known as the G-5 rarely meets. The DCC is close to forming a campaign committee to oversee the referendum. End summary.

Opposition Still Hopeful at CNE

12. (C) Poloff met February 11 with Daniel Thiman (PROTECT), an aide for Miranda State Governor Enrique Mendoza, to discuss the Democratic Coordinating Committee's (DCC) views on the referendum process against President Hugo Chavez. (Note: Thiman works on operations and logistics for Mendoza in the DCC. While he sees himself as "not a politician," he attends most DCC planning meetings. End note.) Thiman said the DCC remains convinced of the inevitability of the referendum, though he admitted some increased doubts over the last week due to the issue of "plana" signature forms (filled out but not signed in the same handwriting). Still, he said that the date the DCC is using internally for getting a response from the National Electoral Commission (CNE) on the referendum is February 27 (Comment: This is much sooner than the OAS/Carter Center estimate that the CNE would finish on March 16 at its current pace. End comment.)

13. (C) Poloff asked Gente de Petroleo chief Juan Fernandez on February 12 about the opposition's expectations at the CNE. Fernandez admitted that many opposition members are not following the signature count as closely as they should. In the end, he said, the politicians in the opposition believe the CNE will strike a political solution and avoid the messy details. (Comment: This may well be the "Venezuelan" solution to the CNE's many troubles, though we wonder whether this meeting of the minds will happen. End comment.)

February 14 March: Caracas-Only Or Greater?

14. (C) Asked why the opposition is pushing the February 14 march, Fernandez said it is based on resentment between the DCC and the CNE. Fernandez said that CNE director Jorge Rodriguez (pro-GOV) asked Mendoza in January to lower pressure in the media against the CNE so that the work could be carried out. The DCC believes they were tricked once it became apparent the CNE was not going to meet the arbitrarily set deadline of February 13. The DCC decided it was time to ratchet up the pressure, lest the count drag on interminably.

15. (C) Thiman said DCC organizers of the February 14 march to the CNE are planning on 100,000 participants (refs a and b). He described the march as a "metropolitan march," meaning that demonstrators would not be bussed in large numbers from around Venezuela, with the exception of some 2,000 Proyecto

Venezuela participants from Carabobo. The tactic of having six smaller marches rally at Plaza Venezuela and head toward the CNE downtown is designed to imitate a military maneuver that will intimidate Chavez, Thiman added. (Note: the GOV announced a "megamercado" of meat sales on February 14 and 15 on Avenida Bolivar, in the path of the opposition march. In the past, the opposition has skirted such events.)

¶ 16. (C) Thiman expressed concern that the GOV seemed to be setting up the opposition for an April 11-like event in which an opposition march to the presidential palace turned bloody. Thiman said the march did not intend to go all the way to CNE headquarters, which is currently surrounded by radical Chavez loyalists led by premiere street activist Lina Ron. Though organizers do not plan to come close to the Chavistas, Thiman worried that the march could "get out of control."

¶ 17. (C) Juan Fernandez said he received word that supporters were coming in from all over Venezuela, causing him to estimate that up to one million people might attend the march. Fernandez said he was very worried about violence, pointing out that each side has radicals who want to force a conflict. (Comment: Fernandez is informed by his network of ex-PDVSA workers around Venezuela, but is not a march organizer.) Fernandez said he was sure the main march would not come close to the Chavistas.

Opposition: An Idiot Savant?

¶ 18. (C) Speaking candidly, Thiman said the opposition suffers from several asymmetries when it comes to political battle: they have lots of guts but few brains. He said the DCC has tremendous operational capability (organizing marches and signature drives) but lacks strategic sense. He suggested this was the reason the opposition opted for a march on February 14 in order to keep pressure on the CNE.

The Opposition's CNE Connection

¶ 19. (C) Thiman described how the opposition collects and processes information from the CNE. The opposition's chief operative at the CNE is Enrique Naime (COPEI), seconded by Nelson Rampersaad (MAS). Naime also has had an official sleeping at the CNE for the last 30 days. In addition, each major political party has, as tradition has dictated, officials placed in key leadership positions throughout the CNE. These officials report their observations to Naime and to their respective party chiefs. Thiman noted also that opposition witnesses observing the verification process also report to Naime.

¶ 10. (C) Naime and Rampersaad visit DCC headquarters daily and brief political party chiefs (secgens and presidents), who also receive information directly from their party members in the CNE. Thiman said these meetings had been twice weekly, but are now being held daily. The information is discussed and a consensus opinion emerges over next steps to take. Thiman also mentioned that Naime meets periodically with the OAS and Carter Center. Thiman conceded that the need for consensus often prevents the opposition from choosing the first best solution, but it is a political reality.

The Opposition's Party Blocs

¶ 11. (C) Thiman said that political parties are the principal actors in the DCC; civil society groups do not have significant influence on major decisions. Traditional parties (AD, COPEI, and MAS) usually side together on DCC decisions with a collection of minor parties (Bandera Roja, Solidaridad, Union, etc.). The pendulum votes are Primero Justicia, Proyecto Venezuela, and Causa R. These parties banded together in January to chastise the other parties for putting priority on the regional elections instead of the

referendum. Thiman said these parties have about 15 candidates between them, which made them averse to regional elections. However, he noted that since then none of the parties have been in the press fighting over regional candidates, an example of what he called the "tropical unity" of the opposition.

A Campaign Committee Coming

¶ 12. (C) The DCC's executive committee, the so-called Group of 5 (or G-5, consisting of Enrique Mendoza, Henrique Salas Romer, Julio Borges, Henry Ramos Allup, and Juan Fernandez) has not met in months, Thiman said. The DCC's political committee, consisting of 60 representatives of parties and

NGOs, will be augmented by a new "G-17" of full-time officials that will function as a campaign committee ("Comando de Campana"). Opposition leaders believe the campaign committee will make the opposition more agile in responding to Chavez on a day-to-day basis. Thiman said there is almost full agreement on the formation of an executive campaign committee, with up to nine members, that will steer the DCC. Enrique Mendoza will continue to head the DCC, he added.

Comment

¶13. (C) Thiman's report that the DCC is still optimistic for a February 27 announcement by the CNE is worrisome given the OAS and Carter Center believe the process will trudge on for another month. We suspect this is a combination of the inaccurate and incomplete information as well as an intentional desire to maintain morale among opposition workers. Still, these insights help explain why the opposition seems prone to error and miscalculation. Against the autocratic style of its opponent, the opposition needs all the help it can get.

¶14. (C) Both Thiman and Fernandez are concerned over possible violence on February 14, expecting a trap laid by the GOV to slice off another layer of potentially disloyal followers in the GOV and military. Both agreed that fringe groups on either side could start something, which would most certainly be counterproductive for the opposition's efforts.

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